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Urban residents breathe life into Downtown

The star's view: Downtown's heartbeat is getting stronger as young professionals seek housing within walking distance of attractions in and near Rio Nuevo.

Not too long ago, Tucson was perceived by newcomers as a city composed of little suburban neighborhoods that repeated themselves about every square mile.

Since the city's growth spurt started just after World War II, when land was cheap and acreage abundant, the single-family house with one or two cars in the carport has been the Tucson norm, along with continuing expansion at the city's borders.

Today, the lure of the suburbs may not have lessened for couples with children, but that growth on the fringes of the metropolitan area is now happening alongside a relatively new phenomenon.

Instead of looking for suburban homes, there evidently is a growing market for housing in the Downtown area and its adjacent neighborhoods among individuals who are young, well-educated professionals with comfortable incomes.

They come here from bigger cities, often attracted by the area's natural beauty but preferring to live in condominiums in or near Downtown.

"This is a market that was not here 20 or 30 years ago," said City Planning Director Albert Elias. "There are more and more folks looking for a more urban type of lifestyle. This is not just a local trend but a national one."

Ideally, this trend will make a slight dent in the degree of urban sprawl that has characterized Tucson's growth in recent decades.

The latest evidence of this demographic shift in Tucson came last week in a proposal from some local businessmen who want to develop the southwest corner of Stone Avenue and Speedway. Their plan for One West calls for an investment of \$21 million in a structure that would house 100 condominiums as well as office and retail space. Its appeal will be to residents who want to live near the city's major cultural attractions.

These new urban residents are generally unlike the families that used to live Downtown either in the barrio leveled for redevelopment or the El Presidio neighborhood north of it.

Aside from being single or couples without children, they are people who like being within walking distance of restaurants, arts district attractions and other amenities, Elias observed. Gary Weiss, one of the principals in the One West project, noted that even though they're used to walking to things, parking space is also essential for the new urban dwellers.

The One West proposal is among numerous projects that have either been built recently or are likely to be built in the next few years. Among the newer housing projects in or near Downtown are Sam Hughes Place at Sixth Street and Campbell Avenue and the Ice House Lofts east of the Armory Park neighborhood.

These developments soon will be joined by high-end condos on Congress Street west of Interstate 10 and others - some in the planning stages, some still undecided - in the Thrifty block

on Congress Street, on Stone Avenue south and west of the Joel D. Valdez Main Library, and another at the corner of Stone and Toole.

All these changes reflect a new and encouraging shift in the way Downtown is perceived.

- S.N.

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